

black people who spoke Russian, who spoke Spanish, who played Mongo Santamaría, who understood mathematics and sat up in bone labs, unearthing the mysteries of the enslaved. There was more out there than I had ever hoped for, and I wanted you to have it. I wanted you to know that the world in its entirety could never be found in the schools, alone, nor on the streets, alone, nor in the trophy case. I wanted you to claim the whole world, as it is. I wanted "Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus" to immediately be obvious to you. And yet even in this cosmopolitan wish I felt the old power of ancestry, because I had come to knowledge at The Mecca that my ancestors made, and I was compelled toward The Mecca by the struggle that my ancestors made.

The Struggle is in your name, Samori—you were named for Samori Touré, who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body. He died in captivity, but the profits of that struggle and others like it are ours, even when the object of our struggle, as is so often true, escapes our grasp. I learned this living among a people whom I would never have chosen, because the privileges of being black are not always self-evident. We are, as Derrick Bell once wrote, the "faces at the bottom of the well." But there really is wisdom down here, and that wisdom accounts for much of the good in my life. And my life down here accounts for you.

There was also wisdom in those streets. I think now of the old rule that held that should a boy be set upon in

someone else's chancy hood, his friends must stand with him, and they must all take their beating together. I now know that within this edict lay the key to all living. None of us were promised to end the fight on our feet, fists raised to the sky. We could not control our enemies' number, strength, nor weaponry. Sometimes you just caught a bad one. But whether you fought or ran, you did it together, because that is the part that was in our control. What we must never do is willingly hand over our own bodies or the bodies of our friends. That was the wisdom: We knew we did not lay down the direction of the street, but despite that, we could—and must—fashion the way of our walk. And that is the deeper meaning of your name—that the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning.

That wisdom is not unique to our people, but I think it has special meaning to those of us born out of mass rape, whose ancestors were carried off and divided up into policies and stocks. I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dress-making and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent

and capable as anyone. "Slavery" is this same woman born in a world that loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes this love in its essential texts, a world in which these same professors hold this woman a slave, hold her mother a slave, her father a slave, her daughter a slave, and when this woman peers back into the generations all she sees is the enslaved. She can hope for more. She can imagine some future for her grandchildren. But when she dies, the world—which is really the only world she can ever know—ends. For this woman, enslavement is not a parable. It is damnation. It is the never-ending night. And the length of that night is most of our history. Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free. Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains.

You must struggle to truly remember this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never compensate for this. Perhaps

our triumphs are not even the point. Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about his world is meant to be. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope.

The birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you, though I know, each day, there are grown men and women who tell you otherwise. The world needs saving precisely because of the actions of these same men and women. I am not a cynic. I love you, and I love the world, and I love it more with every new inch I discover. But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful—the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements. And this is not reducible to just you—the women around you must be responsible for their bodies in a way that you never will know. You have to make your peace with the chaos, but you cannot lie. You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold.